Most of the peasants in the middle ages were serf farmers. They were not considered free and were bound to their plot of land. They worked almost seven days a week and were required to give a certain number of days each week to work on their lord's land. In return they gained land rights. Essentially, they owned the land they farmed. No one could take it away from them while they were alive unless there was extenuating circumstances such as a crime that was committed. A farmer's life was generally hard and full of physical labor, very different from our society today.

People Tending Their Crops Right Outside a Lord's Castle

Farming

The medieval farmer usually had two crops: a spring and a fall crop, the spring consisting of barley, vetches, oats, peas, and beans, while the fall was mainly wheat and rye. Each type of seed was used in a different manner. The rye and wheat, in addition to being sold for cash, were used for bread. The barley was used for beer and the hay and oats were fed to the horses and other livestock such as oxen. To get the fields in proper growing condition, the farmers used oxen to plow the land. Most farmers did not own enough oxen themselves, so plowing was a communal activity. May farmers combined forces to tame the hostile soil. Additionally, the sowing of the fields was on a three year cycle. For any particular field, it was sown for two straight years, and the left fallow for the third. This allowed the soil to regain nutrients, to be ready to host another crop again soon, and to produce more. Also, because they grew more than one crop, they employed a system of crop rotation which is still used today. In crop rotation, different crops are planted on the same field in different years. One year they might plant wheat. The next year they might plant barley. Barley and wheat use different nutrients. That way the nutrients barley uses will build up in the soil while wheat is growing. Then barley is grown which uses up the nutrients in the soil. While the barley is growing, nutrients that wheat uses collect in the soil. The next year wheat is grown again. The cycle continues. Fertilizer was also commonly used. A common technique was called marling. The marling process consisted of spreading clay containing carbonate of lime onto the soil, thus restoring much needed nutrients to grow crops. The also used manure to fertilize, which came from the livestock that they raised, such as sheep, pigs, cows, chickens, and the occasional goat.